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ABSTRACT

The eugenicists of the 1920s and 1930s aggressively pursued media attention and sought policy change for their cause of improving the human race by selective breeding. Eugenics gained momentum in the United States when the American Eugenics Society (AES) was organized in 1921. Policy formation and information dissemination were central to the movement, which was comprised of a loose collection of various committees and organizations. The AES's Popular Education Committee enumerated print media outlets and outlined a strategy for getting publicity. By 1937, the "Conference on Education and Eugenics" was suggesting that eugenics courses in higher education should not be given under the name of eugenics, but might be called "Human Environment, Heredity and Eugenics." Energy was spent at all levels of government, from the president of the United States all the way down to the local level, to implement AES's legislative goals. As politically motivated as the eugenicists were, it is no surprise that their instructions to student assistants sounded more like campaign literature than scientific research. Two of the AES's most noteworthy publicity stunts to promote eugenics were the "fitter families" contest and the sermon contest. The eugenicists had substantial connections to the mass media of the period, and they employed them. However, the lingering Great Depression, the rise of Nazi Germany, and the outbreak of World War II crippled the eugenics movement. Eugenics thrived when the political climate was opportune and when the press was receptive to its ideas. The science died when the cultural currents turned. (Forty-six notes are included.) (RS)

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SCIENCE IN THE PUBLICITY LABORATORY:

THE CASE OF EUGENICS

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Presented to American Journalism Historians Association, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 1993.

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SCIENCE IN THE PUBLICITY LABORATORY: THE CASE OF EUGENICS

A eugenicist and an attorney teamed up in the late 1920s to provoke a little attention for the eugenics cause. The eugenicist, Leon F. Whitney, had recently published a book, Sex and Birth Control, that promoted race improvement by birth control, a controversial topic at the time. The attorney, Clarence Darrow, had a few years earlier in Dayton, Tenn., attracted a great deal of attention to evolutionary science in his defense of John Scopes. Now, eugenics needed some help. Darrow told Whitney to find some unwanted children, give the parents a copy of the book, and get arrested. Darrow would come to the defense. Whitney found a "degenerate" family in New Haven, Conn., and gave the father a copy of the book in the presence of a town selectman. Whitney then went to the police and said he expected to be arrested. Whitney probably erred when he revealed to the police chief that Darrow would be the defense attorney. The chief, alerted to the role of the famous defense attorney, said he would have to consult the Bishop. The chief called Whitney later to tell him how good the book was. Whitney reported that hundreds of copies of the book were being sold in local drugstores, but town officials never got upset enough to arrest him. Apparently Whitney's mother was the only one who was upset by the episode, and her grief was over the possible arrest, not the book. "All that effort for nothing," he lamented.[1]

The eugenicists would spend the next decade whipping up publicity for their cause of improving the human race by selective

breeding. Even though Whitney could not get arrested, he had the right instincts and ideas for generating publicity. The eugenicists aggressively pursued media attention and policy change, which made newspapers, radio, magazines and movies a critical part of their mission. The history of the science and politics of eugenics has been well documented.[2] This study explores the movement's publicity activity, which was the primary lever for prying its way into politics and social policy. Eugenics peaked in the 1920s, with the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which restricted immigration of people deemed "less desirable." Anti-immigration feelings were strong at the time, and eugenicists offered an apparently scientific rationale for an emotional and economic issue.[3]

Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, originated the term "eugenics." In Hereditary Genius (1869), Galton said upper-class parents would pass on to their children those desirable traits that made the parents successful. He was convinced that society needed to promote the reproduction of its better members in order to not be swamped by the unfit, for which urban slums were seen as a prime breeding ground.[4] Galton's book was actually an expansion of a two-part series written for MacMillan's Magazine in 1865. He deemed his field of study eugenics, taking the term from the a Greek root meaning "good in birth" or "noble in heredity."[5]

EUGENICS IN AMERICA

Eugenics gained momentum in the United States when, after the Second International Conference on Eugenics, held in New York City

in 1921, the American Eugenics Society was organized.[6] The AES budget was only a few thousand dollars at first, but was supplemented by substantial gifts from some prominent people, including John D. Rockefeller Jr. and George Eastman. The budget soon was up to $40,000 a year. The founding members saw their mission in grandiose terms, stating that the eugenics movement was "like the founding and development of Christianity, something to be handed down from age to age."[7] The movement was loosely organized around various committees and associations, some devoted to science, others to ideology, and others just to a vague notion of good citizenship. The structure of the movement was itself akin to a political party, with common interests and competing factions jostling for public attention and issuing proclamations of concern about American society and the future of civilization. Policy formation and information dissemination were central to the movement.[8]

THE AES PUBLICITY MISSION

Even before it formally began, the American Eugenics Society was a publicity machine. Its predecessor, the Eugenics Committee of the United States of America, was formed with the idea of having advisory power to government and of spreading popular information about eugenics.[9] The AES' Popular Education Committee, in its annual report for 1930, stated that the goal of the society was to be "national in influence." The committee enumerated the print media outlets and outlined a strategy for getting into them: "a. Newspapers -- 2,000 papers in U.S.; 300 with circulation of 24

million. Follow up articles thru clipping service. Try for daily news events and also daily supplement stories. b. Magazines -- get articles with prestige names." One section was devoted to "Special Short-time 'Stunt' Projects," and included a "fitter families contest," sermon contests, essay contests, exhibits, and community surveys. The report concluded:

> "With something definite for the state committees to do, our Society will also gain valuable publicity. Movements like ours are often seemingly inactive not because of lack of interest but because of lack of national organization of that interest. We could run a one-page 'dittoed' news sheet to all the state chairmen each month to act as a stimulus to them and to the Society."[10]

It may have been that the eugenicists became victims of their own success. By 1937, the "Conference on Education and Eugenics" was suggesting that eugenics courses in higher education "Probably ... should not be given under the name of eugenics. It might be called 'Human Environment, Heredity and Eugenics...." They believed the best way to propagate the faith was indirectly:

> "... [The] Eugenic approach must be made through the environment of the student, economic, cultural, its aspiration for social justice, and the proper atmosphere in all the social sciences. In other words, eugenic propaganda will go furthest if it is treated as incidental to all other social advance. If the eugenicist is to save his soul, he must first lose it...."[11]

Losing one's soul meant forgetting about the scientific aspects of the idea and devoting oneself to the publicity and political effort, leaving the laboratory to join the ranks of eugenical evangelism. The idea of a publicity "attack" was prominent in the report, with at least two conference participants advocating a "eugenic attack" that would be made indirectly, by building a campaign on campuses and among families.[12] Albert E.

Wiggam, an enthusiast who was not trained as a eugenicist but who wrote numerous popular tracts on the subject, stated: "... the most effective way to write about eugenics is not to write about eugenics at all..." He cited articles in Harpers and Good Housekeeping about subsidizing marriage and on whether or not people should marry, articles about eugenics that never mentioned the term.[13]

By the mid to late 1930s, some eugenicists had simply put science second to publicity. A program outline said, "The first aim of a eugenics program must be to develop an intelligent and aroused public opinion...."[14] Leon Whitney, mentioned earlier in the escapade with Darrow and a founding member of the AES, wrote some years later:

> "Our basic idea was to acquaint the public with what eugenics really was. And we did it. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of free publicity resulted from our efforts: I can't say that 'eugenics' became a household word but surely one heard the word used far more frequently than one hears it now, 35 years later....
>
> "With only a small amount of money to start with, our directors in the American Eugenics Society had to figure the means of making Eugenics a household word and as I think back, I'm sure we did a tremendous job. Irving Fisher [a Yale economist and founding AES member] said, 'There are four bases for success in such a movement: 1) a plan, 2) workers, 3) money, and 4)prestige.'"[15]

Those four bases for success applied as well to political success as they did to scientific success. The AES had a plan in clearly articulated legislative goals. The society's state legislative program included proposals for a minimum age for marriage, allowing first cousins to marry only on approval of an expert in heredity, providing more money for institutions for feeble minded, insane, epileptic and "defective" delinquents,

widening the grounds for divorce to include insanity, epilepsy, feeble mindedness, desertion, and sterility (except for age), state authorization by approved physicians to sterilize the insane, feeble minded, epileptic, and those with inherited blindness or "other very serious inherited defect." The attendant federal legislative program called for increasing the tax exemption per child to $1,500, restricting immigration to "those who are superior to the median American in intelligence tests as well as fulfilling such other qualifications as are now imposed," and an extension of deportation privileges.[16]

The energy was spent at all levels of government, from the president of the United States all the way down to the local level. "A constructive program for eugenics work in Nassau County," N.Y., began with an anecdote of two sisters with "only two years' difference in age; one is highly erotic, bringing scandal to the neighborhood by her wayward behavior, and the other is secretary of an educational institution, working hard but vainly to keep her sister from going to the bad." It outlined a county program, the first item being the prevention of procreation of "grossly defective and wayward strains." The document said sterilization legislation alone was inadequate. But, the time may come "when castration of the male and ovariotomy will be accepted as within the province of the state and these operations would, at once, tremendously diminish the amount of crime...."[17] Charles Davenport, director of the Bureau of Eugenics at Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y., was chairman of the board of managers of the "Nassau County

Association," which intended "to promulgate and assist in the enforcement of uniform laws for the protection and safeguarding of the public health...."[18] He believed every state ought to have a program for studying the "pedigrees of the feeble minded... not merely to confirm the laws of heredity of imbecility but to determine the main blood lines of imbecility coursing through this country...."[19]

County and state politics were not the limits for eugenicists. They dealt on occasion with even the highest office in the nation. Raymond Pearl, a professor of biology at Johns Hopkins University medical school, asked President Calvin Coolidge in 1925 to give serious consideration to a bill, "To Establish a Laboratory for the Study of the Abnormal Classes."[20] Pearl managed to get a meeting with President Hoover in 1929, a meeting he requested merely for "personally renewed assurance of my faith in and loyalty to him" not for any request or propaganda.[21] Congress sent Harry Laughlin, head of the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, to make observations in Italy because so many Italian immigrants were pouring into the United States. Laughlin was entertained by no less than Mussolini himself.[22]

As politically motivated as the eugenicists were, it is no surprise that their instructions to student assistants sounded more like campaign literature than scientific research. A form was given to them that provided an imaginary dialogue which guided them on how to approach people on becoming members of AES. The students were basically salesmen, pitching "A Eugenics Catechism" and other

pamphlets pertaining to the cause. Students, the catechism said, needed to have a basic knowledge of eugenics and to exude confidence. Concise, simple answers were provided about the nature of AES, why one should join, the advantages of membership, and how to become a member.[23]

PUBLICITY STUNTS

The AES used publicity stunts to promote eugenics. A couple of the most noteworthy enterprises along this line were the fitter families contest and the sermon contest. Both showed the savvy of the AES in building a constituency and going beyond the broad media audiences to do so.

The fitter families contest was an innocuous way to promote eugenics. After all, who could find offense in promoting good health? At the same time, it was pitched at a level that appealed to traditional values inasmuch as it was not individual selfishness but concern for one's family that was stake. And, finally, it was a great way for eugenicists to collect data while running a publicity campaign. The first contest was at the Kansas Free Fair in Topeka in 1920, and the contests soon were being held in seven to ten states per year. In order to participate, families had to have medical and psychiatric examinations and an intelligence test.[24] As propaganda, the contest was a great success. Whitney wrote that "the publicity was out of all proportion to what it cost.... All the newspapers were glad to cooperate.... No activities of the society got so much publicity."[25] In addition, the AES got information about the families: the names of three

generations, sex, age, marital status, cause of death of family members, birth place, "consanguinity," education, and rank in education.[26] Whitney said it got even more attention than another clever publicity stunt, the sermon contest. He wrote, "We offered a $500 prize for the best sermon preached. Over 500 sermons were sent in but the total number of those who heard them couldn't compare with the number of persons who became interested in Eugenics via the Fitter Family contests...."[27] The sermon contest showed how just about anything could be adapted to the eugenic message. It also took communications of eugenics to a more effective level, the interpersonal one, as opposed to the mediated message. With the sermon contest, people were hearing about eugenics from someone they trusted, they knew, and who was skilled at communicating at the level of the audience. A 1928 letter to ministers included a questionnaire about families in the church. It had to be completed and returned with any entry submitted for the contest. The parish questionnaire sought information on the number of living children, occupation of the father, and how active family was in church.[28]

The sermons interpreted eugenics as a beneficent science, which would, like God, elevate humanity above its innate decadence. One minister declared, "The Bible is a book of eugenics.... Christ was born of a family that represented a long process of religious and moral selection...." Others found a similar compatibility with Christianity and eugenics: "The religion of Jesus is concerned more with the nature of man than with his nurture. And so is

Eugenics...."[29]

There was also a contest in 1929 for the best essay on the causes of the decline in birth rate among "Nordic" people. A problematic issue for eugenics was revealed in the terms of the contest, which for European authors stated: "... the Nordic race is defined as covering the Scandinavian countries south of about 63 [degrees] N. lat., the Netherlands, England, Scotland, North Ireland, and the German States of Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg, Hannover and Westphalia...." Race was defined geographically or by nationality, not by any biological criteria. No definition of race was given for American authors.[30]

PRESS CONNECTIONS

The eugenicists had substantial connections to mass media of the period, and they employed them. In particular, Pearl and Herbert Spencer Jennings, of the Johns Hopkins University Department of Zoology, were adept at cultivating popular print outlets. Pearl was a member of H.L. Mencken's "Saturday Night Club," a social group that met for beer and music.[31] The influential editor of the American Spectator gave a sympathetic ear to Pearl and his eugenicist colleagues. But Pearl also corresponded with editors at the Baltimore Sun, where Mencken worked, Harper's Magazine, and the Saturday Evening Post.[32] At times, Pearl sounded more like a newspaperman than a scientist: "... My own feeling is that it is about time some scientific man did something besides pussyfooting on the question of religion and science."[33] And, writing to Mencken, Pearl sounded rather like

Mencken: "... It has seemed to me for a long time that there is a dreadful lot of bilge talked by the self-constituted leaders of the eugenics movement...."[34] Not all was work, as was indicated by a letter from Mencken, who reported from Tennessee, with his usual flair for lambasting Christians, that the Chattanooga populace was debauched and drunken, but that the city was full of good scotch whiskey.[35] The correspondence of Jennings showed press relations in another circle of publications, which included Popular Science Monthly, Science Magazine, The Nation, and publisher E.W. Scripps.[36]

Jennings was pressed to write reviews and articles for The Nation and The Survey, which he did. The Nation also asked Jennings to write for the series "What I Believe," which was described as being by men and women of "high standing in the field of abstract thought." This was useful to Jennings and the eugenicists not only for the publicity but also as a means of bestowing intellectual legitimacy on their ideas, particularly when coming from one of the more liberal, intellectual publications.[37] In 1923, the managing editor of The Survey said he would publish a Jennings' article on the immigration issue "when the new session of Congress throws the emigration question into relief once more."[38]

Jennings was there, too, in the early days of radio, taking advantage of the relatively new medium to spread the gospel of eugenics. In fact, he was able to take advantage of the crossfertilization of media, with his success in print acting as a springboard to radio exposure. In April 1931, the editors of

Parents' Magazine prepared a radio script that referred to Jennings book, The Biological Basis of Human Nature, which a few months earlier had been judged by the magazine to have been the "outstanding scientific contribution of the year toward the understanding of heredity." In addition, the editors had selected it as one of three outstanding books for parents in 1930. The script was reportedly sent nationwide to about 100 stations, which the magazine said regularly used the material.[39]

Eugenicist Frederick Osborn also took to the airwaves, though a little later than Jennings and with a much more controversial issue than what Jennings had faced. Osborn had made substantial money in banking and railroads, and he quit his business interests in the late 1920s in order to pursue his avocation of eugenics. He was a more liberal thinker than many of the mainstream eugenicists, and found himself at odds with those opposed to immigration.[40] A 1940 radio script for CBS' "Adventures in Science" series shows Osborn discussing the issue of population decline in Europe:

"England muddled along, trying to figure out what to do. Germany began paying people to have children. At the same time they vigorously suppressed practices used in German cities to limit families. The German system worked, the birth rate went up. But it worked mostly with the poorest and most ignorant people...."

"... American parents are increasingly coming to believe that they should not have more children than they can take care of.... [L]ocal communities, states, and the federal government itself are doing more each year to help children with their health, their education, their recreation, and their nutrition, without adding to the expenses of the parents. That is sound population policy on the positive side.... The only trouble with these budding American population policies is that they don't go far enough...."[41]

Though Osborn was steering clear of Nazism, he was advocating a very large role for the government in the rearing of children. The

last sentence suggests that he may not have seen any out outer limits for governmental power in this arena.

THE DECLINE OF EUGENICS

The lingering Great Depression, the rise of Nazi Germany and the outbreak of World War II crippled the eugenics movement. The eugenicists knew in the 1930s, well before the outbreak of war, that Nazism was bad news for their ideals. And they worked to distance themselves from it. In addition, war meant a drying up of donations, which had been a substantial part of their funding.[42] Raymond Pearl knew the "Jewish question" was problematic. He admitted there was no good definition of race, and he opposed Hitler. Pearl recounted an episode in which a committee of eight or ten anthropologists convened in the mid-1930s for purpose of making a brief, accurate statement on the issue of race. They intended to give it to the "public press" with an eye toward combatting "mischievous notions," including those of Hitler. But the committee was never able to come up with an agreement.[43] There was the dilemma. Hitler had taken the eugenic ideals to their logical extreme of purifying the race. Where did the eugenicists draw the line? If eugenicists issued a blanket condemnation of Hitler, they risked self-condemnation. But trying to distinguish between Hitler's racial purity and the racial improvement espoused by American eugenicists was delicate and could risk causing more confusion among laymen.[44]

In a 1936 address at Oxford University, Jennings recognized the problem of government having too much power, but he skirted the

issue of the morality of the state-run sterilization programs that had been the core of eugenic legislative programs. When all else fails, as modern politics has shown, blame the press:

> "... We must free ourselves from the mass of illusions, errors, and badly observed facts, from the false problems investigated by the weak-minded of the realm of science, and from the pseudo-discoveries of charlatans and scientists extolled by the daily press...."[45]

At least one eugenicist found some fruitful application for his years of study in the subject. Leon Whitney wrote, years later, that he applied his training in eugenics to racing pigeons with "exceedingly good results." It was also used to good effect in the horse business, he reported. He said Harry Laughlin had spent some time with a man who contributed more than half and million dollars to science. Laughlin and this individual started figuring out the value of horses based on eugenic principles. The person did so well at auctions, that others caught on to his acumen, and he had to send surrogates to bid for him at auctions because bidding would go thought the ceiling if people saw him bidding.[46]

Eugenics thrived when the political climate was right and when the press was receptive to its ideas. The science died when the cultural currents turned. It grew by publicity as much as by any progress due to discoveries in heredity. The episode also shows the ability of the press to promote suspect ideas, and the susceptibility of the press to concepts couched in the respectable and credible language of science. The eugenicists were extremely successful in getting attention in the press and in building a publicity and political network.

ENDNOTES

The research for this paper was conducted at the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pa. The letters and papers cited below are from the genetics archives at the APS. In the notes that follow, AES is the abbreviation for American Eugenics Society.

1. Leon Whitney autobiography manuscript, Whitney papers.

2. Two very good books on the history of eugenics are: Daniel J. Kevles, In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; Allan Chase, The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism, New York: Knopf, 1977.

3. See Chase, chapter 5. Eugenics was an offshoot of Charles Darwin's natural selection and Herbert Spencer's "survival of the fittest." Darwin realized that his theory lacked an explanation of how traits were passed from one generation to another, but the best he could do was the "pangenesis" hypothesis, which held that "gemmules" existed in body fluids, and that these units which contained the codes for physical characteristics were passed on in reproduction, with the parents' gemmules being blended in the process. Gregor Mendel's research had been completed in the mid-1860s, but made no impact, perhaps a result of his being outside the network of mainstream science, or perhaps because scientists didn't understand what he was doing and simply were not ready for his research. Mendel was not "discovered" until 1900.

4. Peter J. Bowler, The Mendelian Revolution, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) pp. 163-164.

5. Kevles, pp. ix, 7-9.

6. Bentley Glass, A Guide to the Genetics Collections of the American Philosophical Society, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988) p. 89.

7. Kevles, pp. 59-60.

8. Eugenics Committee of USA, AES papers.

9. Eugenics Committee of the United States of America, AES papers.

10. Report and Recommendations, Popular Education Committee, Sept. 9, 1930, AES papers.

11. Conference on Education and Eugenics, March 20, 1937; summary of the discussion, March 20, 1937, AES papers.

12. Conference on Education and Eugenics, March 20, 1937; summary

of the discussion, March 20, 1937, AES papers.

13. Summary of the Conference of Publicists of the AES, New York City, Dec. 11, 1937, AES papers.

14. A Eugenics Program for the United States. The document is undated, but it is 1934-1938 because the president named on the document is E. Huntington. AES papers.

15. Whitney autobiography, Whitney papers.

16. State Legislative Program, 2 pp., AES papers. See Chase, chapter 6, for a discussion of the sterilization laws in the U.S.

17. A Constructive Program for Eugenics Work in Nassau County, Charles Davenport papers.

18. Nassau County Association, Davenport papers.

19. Application of Mendel's Law to Human Heredity, by C. Davenport, Davenport papers.

20. Raymond Pearl to President Calvin Coolidge, Oct. 21, 1925, Pearl papers.

21. Pearl to George Akerson, secretary to the president, August 14, 1929; Akerson to Pearl, August 15, 1929, Pearl papers. There may have been more than mere politics at work between Pearl and Hoover because in a telegram to Pearl's wife in 1940, upon the death of Pearl, Hoover said, "He was one of my most devoted friends over all these years." Telegram, Nov. 18, 1940, from Hoover to Mrs. Pearl.

22. Whitney autobiography, Whitney papers.

23. Second form to student workers, AES papers.

24. Kevles, p. 61, and AES papers.

25. Whitney autobiography, Whitney papers.

26. Davenport papers.

27. Whitney autobiography, Whitney papers.

28. Davenport papers.

29. The two sermons cited are "Whose son art thou, young man?" and "Do men gather graphs of thorns, or figs of thistles?" AES papers.

30. Davenport papers.

31. On Mencken's Saturday Night Club, see "Mencken, Music, and the

Saturday Night Club," by Louis Cheslock, Menckeniana: A Quarterly Review, Fall 1982, No. 83, pp. 13-16.

32. The Pearl papers contain numerous letters with these publications.

33. Pearl to Hamilton Owens, Nov. 12, 1925, Pearl papers.

34. Pearl to Mencken, Sept. 8, 1924, Pearl papers.

35. Mencken to Pearl, July 1925, from Dayton, Tenn.; Mencken to Pearl, July 1928, from Kansas City, Mo.; Pearl papers.

36. Herbert Spencer Jennings papers.

37. Joseph Wood Krutch to Jennings, Sept. 16, 1935; Krutch to Jennings, Oct. 14, 1935; Henry Hazlitt, acting managing editor of Nation, to Jennings, Sept. 15, 1931, Jennings papers.

38. Managing editor of Survey magazine to Jennings, Oct. 25, 1923; Survey to Jennings, June 12, 1923, Jennings papers.

39. Radio script for "The Parents' Forum, A radio feature prepared for your station by the editors of The Parents' Magazine"; Mrs. G.V. Buchanan, managing editor of Parents' Magazine, to Jennings, April 15, 1931; George J. Hecht, president, Parents' Magazine, to Jennings, Feb. 14, 1931, Jennings papers.

40. Kevles, p. 170.

41. "Adventures in Science" radio program script, Nov. 14, 1940, CBS, Osborn papers.

42. Whitney autobiography, Whitney papers.

43. Pearl to Ira J. Williams, March 10, 1939, Pearl papers.

44. See also Williams to Pearl, Feb. 1939; Pearl to Williams, April 28, 1939; Williams to Pearl, Nov. 1939; Pearl to Williams, Nov. 7, 1939; Pearl to Williams, Jan. 4, 1940, Pearl papers.

45. Biological Recommendations for the Ills of Mankind, delivered at Oxford University, June 3, 1936, Jennings papers.

46. Whitney autobiography, Whitney papers.